

Mishler Theatre  
1208 12th Avenue  
Intown Neighborhood  
Altoona  
Blair County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5512

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PA,  
7-ALTO,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MISHLER THEATRE

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- Location: 1208 12th Ave., Altoona, Blair County, Pa.
- Present Owner: Blair County Arts Foundation (BCAF), a non-profit community corporation organized in 1960.
- Present Use: The Mishler Theatre now serves as a civic auditorium as well as a center for the performing arts.
- Significance: The Mishler Theatre is the last remaining downtown theater. Designed as a playhouse by Albert Westover of Philadelphia in 1905-06, and rebuilt after a fire that same year, the theater is a fine example of the Beaux Arts style that dominated public architecture in the early years of the twentieth century. Its brick and Indiana limestone facade is complemented by a lavish interior executed in marble and ornamental plaster in a flamboyant Baroque style. In 1967-69, the theater was the focus of the city's first successful preservation effort. Rescued from demolition in 1965, the building is now renovated and used as a civic auditorium. It stands as a tribute to the foresight and perseverance of the arts community.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1905-06; rebuilt 1906. The opening performance took place February 15, 1906. Eight months later, the theater was gutted by fire originating in the adjacent Rothert's furniture store. On January 21, 1907, the theater re-opened with "pomp and ceremony . . . eclipsing the first opening." ("The Mishler Re-Opened," Altoona Mirror [January 22, 1907], 3)
2. Architect: The building was designed by Albert E. Westover of Philadelphia. Westover, who had offices in the Keith Theatre Building in Philadelphia, was well known as a designer of playhouses and motion picture theaters for the Keith Theatre circuit. Between 1901 and 1919, he planned more than seventy theatres in the northeastern United States and Canada. Westover and Mishler collaborated for a second time when they planned Altoona's Mishler Theatre; in 1904 Westover designed the State Street Theatre in Trenton, N. J., which Mishler owned until 1907, the year he decided to devote his full attention to his Altoona theater. (Tatman, Sandra and Roger W. Moss, 1985. "Noted Theatre Owner Passes," Altoona Mirror [May 9, 1944])
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1923 Isaac Mishler attempted to sell the theater to John S. Ginter, a Tyrone banker, for \$200,000; apparently the sale fell through. On January 9, 1931, Anast Notopolous purchased the theater and added it to his local chain of motion picture theaters. The Mishler remained in the Notopolous family until 1965, when it was acquired by the Blair County Arts Foundation and Altoona Community Theatre, which raised the requisite \$47,500. (Altoona Mirror, [July 18, 1923]; "Mishler Theatre History," typescript, n. d., Altoona Mirror library)
4. Contractor: P. W. Finn and Company, the premier Altoona firm, was the general contractor. At the time of the theater's construction, Finn's crews were also at work on the adjacent Rothert's building, Central Trust Company building, and First Methodist Episcopal Church--all large, prestigious buildings in the commercial district. Finn's firm was also responsible for rebuilding the theater after the 1906 fire.
5. Original plans and construction: The building was designed to accommodate live entertainment in a grand manner. The main floor was equipped with a ladies' parlor and cloak rooms in the rear,

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and there were two balconies. The seating capacity was 1,900. The facade has three limestone stringcourses which define the three parts of the theatre--orchestra, first balcony, and gallery. Contemporary accounts of the construction costs ranged from \$110,000 to \$118,000.

6. Alterations and additions:

Eight months after the theater opened in 1906, it was gutted by a fire originating in the elevator shaft of the adjacent Rother's furniture building. The exterior walls of the theater were still standing and in good condition. The interior was in ruins, however; it dates to the rebuilding of late 1906.

After the fire, the auditorium ceiling was re-designed by Albert Westover, in collaboration with Max Voigt of Tognarelli and Voigt, an interior design firm. The main ceiling was raised 6' to accommodate a dome 40' in circumference and 30' in diameter, which remains intact. A painting representing "The Glorification of Art" was placed within the dome. The dome was then surrounded by sixteen life-sized, classical figures, highlighted with gilt decoration. The seats were enlarged slightly, from 20" to 22" wide, and the aisles were also widened, from 2'-10" to 3' wide.

In 1930, the box office was moved from the side to the center of the entrance lobby, and new seats and velvet curtains were installed. From time to time, additional modifications were made to the theater, which offered only motion pictures from 1923 to 1962.

The Mishler Theatre was also the subject of two restoration projects by the business and arts community. In celebration of its fiftieth anniversary in 1956, the theater was refurbished through the contributions of local merchants. In 1967-69, the BCAF undertook a thorough restoration of the theater, which included the removal of the building's heavy cornice and balustrade. On the interior, the orchestra pit was made level with the rest of the floor, and the seats were reupholstered in a bright red textile. The fly was entirely refurbished in 1967; all of the overhead lights, drop curtains, and equipment for raising and lowering sets are new.

B. Historical Context:

Born in Lancaster, Pa., in 1863, I. C. Mishler moved to Altoona in 1881, becoming an employee of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Beginning in 1894, with the purchase of the Cambria Theatre in Johnstown, Mishler built a veritable entertainment empire. At one time, he controlled the opera houses in both Johnstown and Altoona, and held a controlling interest in playhouses as far-flung as the Lyric Theatre in Allentown; Fulton Theatre in Lancaster; Lyceum, in Patterson, N. J.; and his most ambitious venture before the Mishler, the State Street Theatre in Trenton.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to his involvement in the entertainment industry, Mishler was a member of the Masons, Elks, Odd Fellows, and Knights of Pythias; a director of the Central Trust Company, and a founding stockholder of the Altoona Trust Company. A major stockholder in the Blair Hotel Company, Mishler resided at the Penn Alto Hotel for several years before his death in 1944.

From 1906 to 1923, the Mishler Theatre featured live performances. The playhouse was celebrated for attracting such nationally acclaimed performers as John Philip Sousa, Lillian Russell, Al Jolson, and Helen Hayes. From the outset, Isaac Mishler insisted that his theater offer only "high-class" entertainment; the 11th Avenue Opera House, by contrast, hosted burlesque reviews and less-expensive productions.

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<sup>1</sup>I. C. Mishler, Noted Theatre Owner Passes, "Altoona Mirror" (May 9, 1944).

From 1923 until 1962 the Mishler was used primarily as a movie theater with a yearly dance recital and one or two road shows annually. Then, threatened with demolition in 1965, the theater was purchased by the Blair County Arts Foundation, restored, and reopened for live performances.

The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The design incorporates such classical and Baroque elements as statuary, oval cartouches, and Ionic columns, to enliven the blank facade of the theater.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The three-story, L-shaped building has a six-bay facade, and measures approximately 83' x 120'.
2. Foundations: Granite.
3. Walls: The first story of the facade is faced with rusticated, Indiana limestone. The upper stories consist of a red-brick wall laid in Flemish bond, with limestone quoins. At the second floor there are four round-arched windows separated by limestone columns with Ionic capitals. The columns are mounted on a stone balustrade. At the third story, four bull's-eye windows are flanked by two life-size, stone statues representing Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, and Terpsichore, the Muse of dance. The side and rear facades are of buff brick laid in stretcher bond.
4. Structural systems, framing: Brick bearing walls with iron joists and wood posts. The roof is framed with a flat steel-truss system and wood rafters.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance has four sets of glass and aluminum doors. The two secondary entrances, on either side of the first-floor windows, have round-arches, leaded-glass transom windows and marked vousoirs. On the northeast facade, the alley entrance has an elaborate, limestone surround and several brownstone approach steps. The wood door has five rectangular panels. There is a round-arched stage door on the rear facade.
  - b. Windows: On the facade, the first-floor windows have bracketed lintels and elaborate pediments. There are four round-arched windows between the columns at the second-floor level, and one pedimented window on either end of the facade. The round-arched windows are filled with brightly colored paper designs that resemble stained glass. There are four bull's-eye windows between the statues on the third floor, and one bull's-eye window in the first and sixth bays. The windows on the side and rear facades have been bricked in.
6. Roof:

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- a. Shape: The area over the stage has a hipped roof with a stepped parapet. The rest of the roof is flat.
- h. Cornice: The building was originally crowned with a limestone balustrade and a heavy, ornamental cornice with paired brackets, closely spaced modillions, and a Neoclassical frieze. It was replaced with brick and simple molded bands of limestone in the 1960s.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: The basement has nine dressing rooms on either side of a longitudinal corridor. Originally, the basement had twelve dressing rooms and was also furnished with a gentlemen's smoking room, "fitted up in Flemish style."
- b. First: The entrance lobby, which is 30' wide, was originally decorated with "marble in the French style, and mosaic decoration." The main ticket office was to the right of the lobby, with an emergency ticket-sales office, opposite and to the left of the lobby. The emergency ticket office has since been removed. The main floor, which now seats 499, is reached through four sets of double doors. The proscenium is 38' wide and 31' high. The stage extends to the side walls and measures 43' deep and 70' high.
- c. Balcony: The balcony, which currently seats 402, has an ornate plasterwork front with gilt ornament.
- d. Gallery: The gallery, which has not been restored, has an ornate front covered with swags and other classical motifs. The Notopolous's projection booth still remains in the rear of this balcony.

2. Stairways: The dress circles and balconies were reached by twin staircases rising from the foyer on both sides. The stairways have handsome wood newel posts, turned balusters, and wood treads. An enclosed fire escape, rising to the first balcony, was constructed along the western wall of the theater in the late 1960s.

3. Flooring: The entrance lobby originally had a multi-colored tile floor reading "MISHLER" in red tile; it was replaced with a plain tile floor in the 1960s. The carpets were all "electric red."

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The lobby ceiling, which is 15' high, was "elaborately decorated"; the walls now feature flocked, red wallpaper. The walls of the theater were "apple green." The walls and ceiling are embellished with classical figures and other gilt designs representing themes related to music, art, and dance. There is an allegorical painting in the upper proscenium depicting the spirits of tragedy and comedy. Executed by M. Taylor Rue in 1907, the painting was restored during the 1960s.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The typical interior doors have three rectangular panels and a transom with fixed sash.

6. Mechanical systems:

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- a. Heating/cooling: The building was heated and cooled with forced air driven through various coils. Air was then circulated through the theater with "huge suction fans" that remained in the building until the 1960s.
  - b. Lighting: The theater was originally equipped with 2,900 electric lamps, concealed to prevent glare in viewers' eyes.
  - c. Fire-prevention equipment: A Grinnell glass disc automatic sprinkler system was installed in the theater in 1906 when it first opened. In addition, the theater was equipped with fourteen hose plugs and numerous fire extinguishers. These precautions led one observer to comment that, "It seems entirely impossible to have a fire in the building." (Altoona Mirror [February 15, 1906])
- D. Site: The Mishler Theatre faces southeast on 12th Avenue. Originally, the theater had a 10' open court on either side; at that time it was the most spacious frontage on 12th Avenue. When built in 1905-06, 12th Avenue was a prestigious residential neighborhood lined with brick-veneered dwellings, many in the Queen Anne style. This scale was dramatically altered with the construction of the theater, and the seven-story Rother's furniture building, both in 1906.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: Eight blueprints of architectural drawings by Albert Westover are located in the building. These include plans of the basement, first, balcony, and gallery floors; transverse sections through the stage and auditorium; a longitudinal section and a front elevation.
- B. Early views:
  - 1. Postcard captioned "The playhouse perfect and beautiful," and a postcard view of 12th Avenue looking east, showing the theater and Rother's furniture building. Both, ca. 1910, show the theater before the original balustrade and ornamental cornice were removed. Collection of the Main Street Manager, Altoona, Pa. 16601.
  - 2. Other early views, along with photographs of the 1960s restoration, can be found in the collection of the Blair County Arts Foundation, Altoona Pa.
- C. Interview: Bill Maloy, stage manager since the BCAF acquisition, and current theater manager, interview by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., (July 21, 1989).
- D. Bibliography:
  - 1. Primary sources:  
Altoona Mirror:
    - "I. C. Misbler, Noted Theatre Owner Passes," (May 9, 1944).
    - "Misbler Theatre has Anniversary," (October 15, 1930).
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"Rothert Building, Mishler Theatre and Elks Home Burned This Morning," (October 19, 1906).

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#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.